

The Socialist Labor Party

WHENEVER a history of what passes for the American labor movement is written, the Socialist Labor Party always secures a niche. It is usually stated that the SLP was established in 1890 as the first party of Socialism in America, that Daniel De Leon joined the SLP very soon after, that under De Leon's guidance the SLP worked out the concept of revolutionary industrial unionism which found its first expression in the 1905-1908 IWW, that until De Leon's death in 1914 the "fighting SLP" was a force to be reckoned with and feared by trade union bureaucrats and reformist labor politicians. Perhaps mention is also made of Lenin's praise of De Leon as the only Marxist since Marx to have added anything to Socialist theory. But that is all. If the SLP is referred to at all as a party after 1914 it is only in terms of a freak phenomenon, a feeble grouplet that has survived to the present, notable only for its devotion to the memory of De Leon, of little or no influence. Aside from that, the record is blank. Quite a few people must have wondered from time to time: What has happened to the Socialist Labor Party in the last thirty years? Or better, what kind of outfit is the SLP today?

\$200,000 A Year

First of all, if it is nothing else, the SLP today is a very good machine for collecting money. Considering its size and the working class character of its membership, the SLP by far outranks any other so-called workers' party in the efficiency of its accumulation. A total membership of less than 1600 is systematically milked to the tune of about \$200,000 annually. As a proletarian group, the SLP has an eye-popping bank-account—\$150,000 in January, 1946. Whatever its insolvency otherwise, the SLP is quite solvent financially.

Secondly, the SLP is an excellent machine for disbursement. A very healthy slice of the funds gathered are used to finance the National Office of the party. The total National Office payroll is not far below \$1,000 weekly! Evidently the SLP members support their ruling apparatus in quite decent style. At the very top, the National Secretary, Arnold Petersen (in office 33 years), has enjoyed the security of steady employment since the beginning of World War I. Any research by the membership as to remuneration of National Office employees is *lèse-majesté*. Recently in New York an importunate member who raised the question of party payrolls was expelled—for "conspiracy" to "discredit the National Administration of the Party."

Thirdly, the SLP today, or rather the Petersen clique which runs it, is a machine to make Daniel De Leon a paying proposition. In effect, the SLP has organized a fairly successful *business*. The stock in trade which the SLP (i.e., Petersen's machine) sells to its membership, and to whatever outside workers it can contact is its monopoly as the "carrier" of De Leonism. This corruption of De Leon's teachings into a mere article of merchandise is a precise measure of the degeneration of the SLP since De Leon's death. The ruling bureaucracy of the party, like

any other vested interest, concentrates its attention on preserving its control, maintaining its cash balance and ensuring a steady source of income. The one party activity which it pursues with any enthusiasm and method, aside from the periodic purges, is the scientific appropriation of funds. Everything else is either irrelevant or merely contributory. The carrying out of actual propaganda work is the formula which justifies the continued existence of the party, the continued self-sacrifice of its membership and therefore the continued rule of the bureaucratic machine.

Midget Totalitarians

Finally, and above all, the SLP is a particularly ruthless totalitarian body. Over the years the Petersen cabal has developed an apparatus of control which is absolutely fool-proof. All procedures in the SLP are calculated to bind the membership to bureaucratic rule, to suppress in advance any possible criticism of the machine, to enclose the members in a mental straitjacket of ignorance, self-flattery and abject obedience. SLP members inhabit a fantastic authoritarian regime, made nightmarish by the fact that it passes itself off as a party of Socialism. Those who accept the regime have the humiliation and indignity of surrender. Those who cannot accept the regime are purged in the celebrated Stalinoid manner. The SLP has long been proud of its "ability" to rid itself of its "impurities," i.e., its rebellious members. Logically those members who are most active and self-sacrificing through their devotion to Socialist principle are inevitably the first to rebel against the venality of the ruling body. They are therefore the first to be expelled by the machine they helped support with their activity and self-sacrifice. A bitter payment and a cynical reward. The SLP machine has perpetuated itself through the exploitation and abuse of sincere workers for Socialism, brutally cast out once they recognize the fraud.

The restrictions to which SLP members are subjected constitute the familiar catalogue of totalitarian controls:

¶ There is a ban on free communication within the SLP. Any member who dares to discuss "contentious" party issues via correspondence with another member is . . . expelled. If SLP members want to write to each other, they have to go underground.

¶ There is a ban on private discussion within the SLP. Any member who dares to talk "Party matters" alone with another member must do it in a bathroom, behind locked doors. If he is unfortunate enough to be overheard by an unfriendly party ear, he is . . . expelled.

¶ It is very dangerous in the SLP for a member to introduce "contentious" issues on the floor of his Section. The act becomes especially suicidal when the issues seem "to discredit the National Administration of the Party." Anyone who makes the reckless attempt is . . . expelled.

¶ In the SLP whatever information is doled out to the membership must pass through an all but military censorship. Party facts are classified as "confidential" until they have been "officially released" to the members at large. Any premature leak is not "in the best interests of the Party." Guilty members are . . . expelled.

¶ Any member expelled from the SLP is consigned permanently to the outer darkness. The faithful who remain within must shun the "expelled disrupter" (SLP slogan of anathema). He who fraternizes or associates with an "expelled disrupter" is . . . expelled.

¶ The SLP, like the Roman Catholic political machine, also has an Index Expurgatorius. All members are instructed to "return unopened" or "immediately destroy"

all material of a "disruptive" nature that gets into their hands. Those who commit the heresy of *reading* the material are . . . expelled.

A Well-Oiled Machine

The SLP expulsion machinery has never failed to work with 100% efficiency. Once a member is entangled within its coils he doesn't stop moving until he is irrevocably out of the party. Again, the bureaucratic techniques are quite familiar.

The SLP National Office machine first makes full use of its monopoly of all "legal" channels of communication within the party to establish the necessary lynch-mob atmosphere. Experienced hatchet-men, disguised as national organizers, travel thousands of miles at party expense to expedite the purge. Special printed newspapers and letters are sent via party channels to every member throughout the country. Since those to be purged are barred from these channels, the machine propagandists have a field holiday in character assassination. The bigger the lie the more readily the machine uses it. The National Secretary recites his litany of totalitarian invective: "Tramp," "Thief," "Spy," "Rodent," "Disrupter-Reptile," "Criminal," "Imbecile," leading up to the crashing finale of "Nazi"(!), "Fascist"(!), "Stalinist"(!). Thus SLP justice is executed. When the members generally have been properly propagandized and intimidated, the machine moves in for the kill. Should a local Section still refuse to perform the demanded act of expulsion, the machine simply smashes the Section and expels it en masse. The "expelled disrupters" are thenceforth the "worst enemies of the SLP and of the working class," actual "dregs of humanity" unfit for human association. If the machine had had a political State or Siberia at its disposal, it would not have hesitated to use it.

In the typical Stalinoid manner, each purge is followed by a required party-wide pledge of allegiance. The appetite of the SLP machine for unanimous approval is insatiable. Any doubts members have had must be suppressed, any idea that the rebels were unjustly executed must be censored from the mind "without reservation," any notion that the rebels were not "Party criminals" and "disrupter-reptiles" must be thrust out of consciousness. For the "record," the wavering members must sign a questionnaire to that effect. Thought-control is an honored SLP practice. Not only must the "loyal" SLP member vote unanimously where the machine is concerned, but he must also think unanimously. The SLP machine is satisfied with nothing less.

The SLP politicians have extensive means of control not readily discernible on the surface of the party. The machine freely grants to itself the self-same rights of communication which it brutally denies the membership. A correspondence network of stooges has been built up in most local Sections throughout the country, flattering themselves as important links in the bureaucratic chain. The prime aim of these stooges is to preserve their close association with the party hierarchy, informing it of all ground rumblings of discontent, of all actual outbreaks of criticism, of all potential rebels against the bureaucratic misrule. Regularly and systematically, "confidential reports" are submitted to the National Office. The national machine rewards its espionage agents with the privilege of carrying out its under cover directives. The "information" these stooges secretly convey to the machine politicians always outweighs the officially adopted word of any Section. Indeed, such "information" becomes the of-

I say now that there is no more complete democracy anywhere except [sic] that which prevails in the SLP. In no other party or group is the organization so completely in the hands of the members as in the SLP. In no other group or party is it so impossible as in the SLP for party officers, or executive bodies to impose their will arbitrarily upon the membership.

—Arnold Petersen, National Secretary, Socialist Labor Party; in the 1947 Report of the National Executive Committee.

ficial party "record," exactly as such hidden means of control become the actual legal structure of the party, behind the phoney "democratic" facade.

It is absurd to think that those who surrender to SLP totalitarianism can seriously attack class society. Men who accept and are habituated to slavish submission cannot work for freedom. Like the victims of any other authoritarian rule, SLP members exhibit the characteristic abject fear, the same furtive anxiety. They are obsessed with the fear of being overheard, the fear of being seen in the wrong company, the fear of being found on the anti-machine side on any serious question, the fear of protesting too vigorously, the fear of being denounced to the party authorities, in short, the fear of behaving with any degree of dignity or self-respect. Not only do they fail to pass muster as Socialists, they even flunk out as honest bourgeois democrats!

Why Do They Submit?

Since the SLP is a "voluntary" organization, the question unavoidably crops up: Why does a person submit to the humiliation of SLP membership? The following seem to be the main reasons:

(1.) The SLP monopoly of "De Leonism." Actually the SLP member, if he seeks to propagate the De Leonist principle has no other place to go. The full flavor of the fraud perpetrated on the membership can thus be appreciated. Not only are the De Leonist teachings the stock in trade of the Petersen machine, but they also serve as the moral blackmail to hold a frightened membership in line. Unless they submit to the machine, the SLP unfortunates simply are not permitted to work for Socialism. A principle of emancipation in the hands of machine politicians thus serves as a means of despotic control. The Socialist conviction of the average SLP member must constantly be stretched to accommodate the increasing strain of party membership.

(2.) The fatuous acceptance of the propaganda line that the SLP machine is saving "De Leonism" from outside contaminating influences. Here the machine works the in-group psychology in a way that would do credit to Goebbels. For example:

¶ The point is made that the party is a select group. (The Master Race.) The machine keeps the party membership pure.

¶ The point is made that the party is encircled by a hostile world which is waiting for the first opportunity to crush the party. (Encirclement.) Cleave to the machine lest the party be crushed.

¶ The point is made that spies and agents of capitalism are always sent inside the party "in order to breed distrust, demoralization, dissension and factionalism." (Fifth Column.) The machine guards the party by cementing it monolithically against invading "dissenters" and "fault-finders."

¶ The point is made that the party must become ever

more rigorous in its discipline, purging itself as a healthy body of such unclean and impure elements as "trouble-makers" and "chronic dissenters" ("Inefficient" Democracy.) The machine always preserves the membership from the dangerous "excesses" of democracy.

¶ Etc., etc. After years of this sort of conditioning, a "good" SLP member is ready to swallow anything the machine dishes out, and usually finds he has to.

(3.) The tangible organizational pleasures of SLP membership. Machine propaganda exploits the satisfactions as well as the fears of the in-group. The typical "loyal SLP man" is bound to the bureaucratic apparatus almost exactly as the lodge-member is bound to his lodge. There is inculcated a feeling of exclusiveness, of superiority, of snobishness. This lodge has a Socialist ritual. Its superiority is perfect, unassailable, beyond the reaches of self-criticism. It is the brave spartan band, the elite of the workers, the only truly moral people.

It's quite evident that the SLP of Daniel De Leon died a long time ago. What now passes for it is a grotesque caricature, an imposition on the American working class. High time that the Petersen cabal are pried loose from their death-grip over the teachings of De Leon. If De Leonism is ever to gain the hearing of the American workers, it will not be through the fraud that today calls itself the Socialist Labor Party.

NATHAN DERSHOWITZ

Appendix:

Specifications of Charges Against F. Hyman

Charge 1.

A. For the past four months F. Hyman has openly aligned herself with, and supported the efforts of, those deeply involved in the efforts to disrupt Section New York and discredit the Party's National Administration. In all the controversial issues raised (for disruptive purposes, as has been proven conclusively by now) F. Hyman's sympathy and support was given by both voice and vote to the disruptive element.

a. She voted in favor of the motion to appeal the then N.E.C. Sub-Committee ruling re visiting members at the Jan. 22d meeting of Section New York.

b. She voted against the objection to consideration of the motion made by Dershowitz at this same meeting calling for the removal of the National Secretary.

c. She appeared as a witness for Dershowitz at the Grievance Committee hearing at which the charges against Dershowitz were being investigated.

d. She voted against the findings and recommendation of the Grievance Committee in the Dershowitz case (Section N. Y. meeting, March 12, 1947)

e. She appeared as a witness for B. Orange at the Grievance Committee hearing at which the charges against B. Orange were being investigated.

f. She abstained from voting on the findings and recommendation of the Grievance Committee in the B. Orange case. (Section New York meeting March 26, 1947.)

g. She has circulated the lying slanders and contentions of the disrupters among out-of-town members of Section New York on at least one occasion and possibly more. I cite I. Feinberg as a witness on this point.

Charge 2.

A. During the disruptive period, and more specifically since the March 26, meeting of Section New York, F. Hyman has conducted herself in a manner unbecoming a member of the Socialist Labor Party.

a. Immediately after the Section meeting of March 26, at which the Section passed a motion to request her to explain her abstinence from voting in the B. Orange case and her attitude toward the disrupters, she stopped attending Section meetings which she had been attending regularly before that.

b. She did not attend the N. Y. State Convention nor the State Convention affair, thus further disassociating herself with Party affairs and activities.

c. On Saturday, April 12 she told certain out-of-town members, who had come into the city for the Convention, of an event which had occurred in the Party information regarding which had not yet been officially released, thus indicating that she had obtained this information through "unofficial" sources. Furthermore, no matter where the information came from, it was of such nature that circulation of it at that time was not in the best interests of Party. I again cite I. Feinberg as a witness on this point.

Fraternally submitted,

April 23, 1947

(Signed) NATHAN KARP

II.

Dear Comrades:

In answer to your charges dated April 23rd, 1947:—

As I have already stated in my letter to Section New York, I do not believe there existed a deliberate and conscious movement to disrupt Section New York and discredit the National Organization. Therefore, when voting upon issues on the section floor, I definitely was not supporting the efforts of anybody or anything. I was merely giving an honest expression of my own thoughts and opinions derived from arguments and facts presented to the membership, and which action I have always thought was in perfect accord with S.L.P. principles and its constitution. . . . What is the meaning or reason for voting if not to give voice to your opinion? If, unbeknownst to me, taking a vote has some other purpose—the performance becomes a farce. The important thing it seems to me is to abide unreservedly with the majority's decision whether you agree or not—after a vote is taken. . . .

As for witnessing the hearings of two expelled members—I have nowhere come across the information that this was not in order. On the contrary, I am of the opinion that it is the duty of every conscientious S.L.P. member to acquaint himself with every available fact before voting to expel or not to expel a comrade from the organization. Being present at a hearing is one way of getting these facts.

I deny the accusation that I have circulated lying slanders and contentions among out of town members. I can only wonder how the witness on this point, I. Feinberg, got his information, as I have not spoken to him or been in his company for about five months, and then it had nothing to do with Party matters. . . .

In answer to charge No. 2, (a) and (b):—the reasons for my absence from section meetings and the N. Y. State Convention and affair, are a result of purely personal matters.

Regarding charge No. 2, (c):—On Saturday, April 12th, two out-of-town members spent the night at my house so they would be able to attend the S.E.C. meeting. Unintentionally that day I had learnt of the fact that I mentioned to them in the course of a conversation, which I herewith state was not of my own choosing but inevitable when members are visiting at your house. To be completely truthful, it was my heartfelt desire *not* to get into a discussion, but much against my wishes this became impossible, and I can only say now it's too bad people you think are your friends besides being your comrades are anything but! Aside from this, it's absurd to think that the mentioning of this fact to these two comrades would be detrimental to the interests of the Party.

I close with saying that it's too bad the Section's time has to be wasted with the taking up of charges of such an unfounded and frivolous nature.

Sincerely,

May 6, 1947

(Signed) FLORENCE HYMAN

III.

Dear Comrade Hyman:

The Grievance Committee will not report on your case to Section New York at the business meeting to be held tomorrow evening.

In considering your note of May 6, the committee was confused

as regards your attitude toward disruption in the Party, and your view of the expelled disrupters. In order to resolve the doubts your note has created, I hereby ask you to answer the following questions categorically:

1. Do you now believe that there existed a deliberate and a conscious movement to disrupt the National Organization and to discredit the national administration of the Party—in short, a conspiracy aimed at the heart of the Party, and in which the expelled Section New York disrupters were active participants?

Yes _____ No _____

2. Do you now believe that the disrupters in New York were expelled for just and proper reasons, that their conduct and lying propaganda left the Party no choice but to expel them?

Yes _____ No _____

3. Do you now unqualifiedly accept, and unreservedly approve, the resolution adopted by the N.E.C. in session May 4, 1947 (copy enclosed), which among other things brands the leading disrupters (which means particularly the expelled New York disrupters) as *Party criminals* who never again shall be honored with S.L.P. membership?

Yes _____ No _____

Truthful answers to these questions, made without the slightest mental reservations, should help to resolve any existing doubts or confusion in relation to the charges against you.

Please answer by return mail.

Fraternally,

(signed) JOSEPH PRINCIN, *Secretary*
Grievance Committee,
Section New York, S.L.P.

May, 13, 1947

ARE YOU TIRED OF THE "SECURITY AND BENEFITS" PROVIDED BY THE U.S. ARMY? DO YOU WANT TO LIVE DANGEROUSLY? BECOME AN ADVENTURER OF PEACE AND FREEDOM: JOIN THE WAR RESISTERS LEAGUE.

The War Resisters League is made up of men and women who refuse to participate in any war; they realize that peace and freedom are not static "things" but are dynamic and indivisible processes which are dependent upon the courage and action of men of moral conviction. They hold that non-violent resistance, while it is surely dangerous in this dangerous world, offers more hope to men than the reliance on organized violence which strengthens alike Soviet totalitarianism and American Militarism.

The membership declaration of the WRL is: "War is a crime against humanity. I therefore am determined not to support any kind of war, international or civil, and to strive for the removal of all the causes of war."

WAR RESISTERS LEAGUE, 5 Beekman St., N. Y. 7, N. Y.

☐ I want to join the WRL.

☐ I do not want to join the WRL, but I do want further information and a literature list.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ UNIT _____ STATE _____